

CHAPTER 31: REDEEMED

Log date: November 25, 10,007 EE

Location: Interstellar space

Log note: A new country

AFTER LANE'S SWARM HAD DESTROYED the last surviving Ranger colony, he returned to life in his Vault. He and his people then spent year after year living in worlds of pure fantasy and depravity. His technology not only worked, but it also extended his life enormously – which was exactly what he had worked so hard to achieve. His life was extended for thousands of years.

Things went well for those who lived in Vault 37, but the other Vaults began to experience problems. After a few short decades catastrophic problems began to develop. Since there was no one left to maintain the machinery that the Vaults depended upon, things eventually started going wrong. The maintenance bots did their job well but they were not perfect. When problems arose there was no one around to notice them, much less resolve the issue. The Vaults on Alpha Centauri A were destroyed in an unfortunate disaster and everyone perished.

The same fate befell the Vaults on Xanthe. After just fifty years there was only one Vault that was still functioning, and that was Vault 37. All of the other Vaults had gone offline and the people in them were dead. The reason Lane's Vault never broke down was because Lane assigned Adrian Garza to care for it. Every so often Adrian would wake up from his fantasies, return to the real world, and check the health of the Vault. Since Adrian was there to watch over the systems and resolve problems before they became catastrophes, things never went terribly wrong. If someone had done that for the other Vaults they might have lasted longer – but no one was interested in taking that responsibility.

After five thousand years Vault 37 was still operational. By then, though, things had begun to change in the outside world. The *Sparrow* brought the Stryker family to the 73rd century, and shortly after that Amy and Amanda Stryker were freed from their time stasis at the Artilect. The twins then led the Artilect to victory against the bot swarms and ended their five-thousand-year reign of terror. Once the war was over the Strykers offered a new life to the people in the Vault – a life among the millions of worlds the Nehemiah IV probes had terraformed.

Lane immediately rejected their offer. He hated the idea of reality back in the 25th century, when Professor Grimes and Victor Stryker were still alive, and he hated it even more in the 73rd century. Since the Strykers did not love his virtual worlds and were trying to persuade people to leave his Vault, he decided they were a serious threat. He treated them the same way he treated the Rangers: he assassinated the Stryker family and destroyed the Artilect.

But in spite of his best efforts Amy Stryker survived – and Lane was killed. After his death Lane was condemned for his great and terrible sins against the Most High God and was cast into Hell. All of the evil that he had ever done was judged, and he was sentenced to be tormented by fire for all of eternity with no hope of escape or comfort. Lane's wicked choices finally caught up with him.

Once Lane was gone Amy put an end to Vault 37. She offered its inhabitants forgiveness and told them of the power of God to save them, but they refused to listen to her. Instead of choosing life they chose death. In the end they all died and only a few were saved.

Amy then went to Sol and freed that star system from the Wall that had surrounded it since

the 19th century. She gave Mars a chance at a new future and they took it. Amy made a similar offer to Earth; some took advantage of it and others did not. When her task was done she went through the Door to Heaven and left behind new civilizations on Earth and Mars.

On February 9, 7351 the Lord returned and put an end to the old universe, with its sin and pain and death. The great and terrible Day of Judgment finally came. On that day the dead, small and great, stood before God. The books were opened, and the dead were judged out of those things that were written in the books. Those whose names were written in the Book of Life were saved, and those whose names were not written were cast into the Lake of Fire, where they were tormented day and night. When the final judgment was over the Lord created a new Heaven and a new Earth. In that glorious place there was no death or sorrow or crying or pain, for the former things had passed away.

Ten thousand exciting and action-packed years passed. Then one day...

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The six Administrators agreed with Professor Grimes' plan and instructed the Artilect to watch the area around Victor's Singularity for the appearance of any new alien starships. The Artilect agreed to this task and executed it faithfully. While he went about his duties in the rest of the universe, the Artilect deployed equipment that carefully monitored that mysterious void between the stars. The days grew long and no ships appeared, but the Artilect kept watching. He was very patient, and he would not abandon his assigned task.

Meanwhile, as the years went by, the rest of the Administrators went on about their lives. They all had many things to keep them busy – things to learn, things to see, places to visit, and new mysteries to unravel. There was no end of adventures to be had. It was an amazing time to be alive – and each day was better than the one before.

For six years the Artilect waited and found nothing unusual or strange. For six years life continued as normal. Then, in the seventh year, it finally happened. On November 25, 10,0007 of the Eternal Era, a starship of a very unusual design appeared out of nowhere. One moment there was nothing and the next moment it existed.

It took the Artilect less than a minute to analyze this vessel and discover that it had the same unusual technology and exotic matter that had been found on the *Vaughn*. It took him only seconds to discover that this ship had living creatures on board. The mysterious builders had finally returned.

The Artilect immediately contacted the Stryker twins. It was time for them to make first contact. The long wait was over.

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When Amy and Amanda Stryker were told the news they immediately dropped everything that they were doing. Although they had become involved in other matters, this could not wait. They had spent years waiting for another ship to appear, and there was no way to know how long that ship would remain in their space or how soon its passengers would vanish. It was possible the ship would only stay around for a few minutes before it crossed over into U16b. They had to make contact right away.

Yet the twins did not go straight to the *Vaughn II*. Instead they went to Ayala to get Velvet Dawn. Even though time was in short supply, they had a promise to keep. They had told their friend that she

would accompany them to the end of this mystery, and they were going to keep that promise. The twins were not going to board the *Vaughn II* without her.

Velvet Dawn was surprised to see them. "I didn't know you were going to be paying me a visit today! If you had given me a little advance notice I could have prepared something for you."

"Or you could have had one of your minions prepare it," Amy Stryker teased.

The purple wisp glowed brightly. "I'll admit I've become a little more well-known over the past few years. It seems that the new abilities you gave me have opened up all kinds of possibilities for our race. It's all been good, of course – we can do things now that we couldn't do before. We're becoming a modern civilization! But it does take up a lot of my time."

"You've been using your powers very well," Amanda replied. "It's great to see what your race has done to Ayala. It's changed a lot since we first asked you to join us seven years ago."

"It really has. So what can I do for you?"

"Can you guess?" Amy asked. "Why do you think we're here?"

Velvet paused to think. "Hmmm. Well, the only bit of business I can think of that we haven't finished yet has to do with that ship we explored in that faraway galaxy. It had some kind of funny name. The *Vaughn*, maybe? Seems like we were waiting on something to happen."

"That's exactly right! We've been waiting, and our waiting has finally paid off. The builders have sent another ship into our space and the Artillect says that it has living creatures on board. Living creatures! I can hardly wait to meet them – but we don't want to meet them without you. We'd like for you to be there when we make first contact."

"I'd be delighted!" Velvet exclaimed.

"Is now a good time?" Amanda asked.

"I don't see why not."

"Then let's go!" Amy said eagerly.

The three of them vanished.

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Amy, Amanda, and Velvet Dawn appeared on the bridge of the new ship. They immediately noticed that this vessel was several times larger than the *Vaughn*. It was clearly more powerful than its predecessor – and it was packed with mysterious equipment. Whoever built it clearly had some sort of purpose in mind. They were trying to accomplish something – and if Grimes was right, they were attempting to breach the barrier and reach the U16b anomaly.

"I can see them!" Velvet Dawn said excitedly. "I don't think they can see us though."

Amy and Amanda used their nanites to scan the bridge. They immediately saw four unusual beings on it. They didn't look like any other creatures they had ever seen.

"You're right," Amy commented. "They aren't aware of our presence at all. It's like we're not even here."

"I guess that makes sense, though," Amanda said. "We can't see them without these nanites, so maybe it works the same way – I guess they can't see us either."

"So what do we do?" Velvet Dawn asked.

"We make ourselves visible to them," Amy replied. "When the Artillect studied their technology he came to understand how it works – and how to recreate it. We can use his knowledge of the nanites to create an image of our form in the type of matter that they can see. This won't actually

change us – it's just an illusion for their benefit – but it should let them know that we're here.”

“But how are we going to talk to them?” Velvet asked.

“I don't know yet,” Amanda said. “Let's just go with it and see what happens.”

The three friends commanded their nanites to change their visible appearance. From their perspective nothing happened – but the four aliens reacted strongly to what they had done. The entire group stopped what they were doing and stared in astonishment at Amy, Amanda, and Velvet. They were frozen for a moment, and then started talking excitedly. But what they were saying could not be heard.

Amy immediately knew what to do. “The communications system! Let's try sending them a message that way. We know they can pick up *those* signals! Thanks to the Artilect we know how to send the kind of signals that they can receive. Maybe we can talk to them that way.”

“Our nanites can do that, right?” Velvet Dawn asked.

“Right,” Amanda said.

All three of them connected to the system that the *Vaughn* had used to receive messages. “Hello there!” Amy broadcast. “It's nice to finally meet you at last. We've been looking for you for a long time!”

One of the beings glanced down at the console in surprise. It then picked up a small device and talked into it. “Are you talking to us over this machine?”

“Yes we are,” Amanda said, grinning. “I'm sorry for the inconvenience. This is all kind of new to us. You see, when you're in our space we can't see you without the aid of special technology. We can only hear what you're saying when you talk into your communicator – and I guess that's the only way you can hear us as well.”

“*Your* space?” the being exclaimed, surprised. “Do you mean you live in the void? But how is that possible? There is nothing out here except for the great tear!”

Amy laughed. “This isn't a void! It's just part of the universe – and the universe is really, *really* big. We're not the only ones who live here either. There are dozens of other civilizations all around us that are spread across trillions of stars and more trillions of planets. There is a *lot* of life out here.”

The beings looked at each other in amazement. A different being spoke up. “We had no idea. We thought that life only existed on our own world and that the void was nothing but emptiness. The matter that exists in this void is so unusual and strange that we can only work with it using the most precise materials. We never imagined that it could support life.”

“We thought exactly the same thing about *your* matter. We had to invent new technology just so we could see you. In fact, we would never have even known you existed if it wasn't for Velvet Dawn here.”

“That's me!” Velvet said quickly.

Amanda spoke up. “Velvet was our bridge. She is made of matter that we're familiar with, but she can see your exotic particles. If it hadn't been for her we never would have found you.”

“It's just how the Lord made me,” Velvet explained. “I can't take any credit for it. But it's so nice to finally meet you! We've been trying to find you for such a long time now.”

“We were unaware of this,” the first being replied. “In fact, it would seem there is a great deal that we are unaware of. It is amazing to consider that there are entire civilizations right outside our home that we did not notice. It opens up many new possibilities.”

“You don't know the half of it,” Velvet Dawn said excitedly. “Just wait until you see the place where Amy and Amanda are from! Their home is the City of God – the New Jerusalem. They dwell

with the Lord Himself. It's the most beautiful and amazing place you've ever seen! Nothing else even comes close to it. The city is lit by the glory of God and is tremendously holy. No place in the entire universe is better – and yet mankind *lives* there.”

“But how is that possible?” the first being asked. “The Lord lives in His dwelling place, surrounded by His immortal servants. He dwells in inapproachable light. His abode is far beyond reach and He lives in unimaginable glory. Are you truly His servants? Are you among those who live in His holy city?”

“We certainly are,” Amy said.

“So are you angels, then?” the being asked.

“Oh no,” Amanda replied. “We're not angels. They are entirely different species. We are the Redeemed. We were created around the same time, but we're very different and have a complicated backstory.”

“I am not familiar with the Redeemed. That is an unusual title! To redeem something means to purchase it. Were you purchased? How did this come about?”

“Do we ever have a story to tell you! It's the most glorious story of all. Let me tell you what the Lord has done for us.”

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News of first contact with the remarkable beings who created the *Vaughn* rapidly spread throughout the universe and was received with great joy. First contact was always an exciting occasion, but this was more momentous than normal. The first signals from this alien race had been received in the old universe by Victor Stryker. Nearly fifteen thousand years passed between the discovery of that first signal and the day that Amy, Amanda, and Velvet Dawn met them on board the *Vaughn II*. It took a great deal of effort from many people in order to bring that moment to pass, and when it finally happened there was much celebrating.

The beings from Zovitalia were astonished to learn that they were not alone in the universe. They told mankind that they were indeed trying to reach the U16b anomaly, and the reason they were doing it was because they were seeking to discover other life. The fact that there had always been abundant life all around them was a source of great amazement. There were entire worlds out there that they missed because they could not perceive them.

The Artillect used his immense capabilities to help the Zovians create tools that let interact more easily with the rest of the universe. Once he taught the aliens how to access the universe, they sent a delegation to mankind. From that moment on things began to change.

The first thing the Zovians wanted to do was visit Zion. They had heard about the Lord and they loved Him but they never imagined they would be granted access to His holy city. They never thought that they would walk down the New Jerusalem's streets or meet the One who had created it. Thanks to the Artillect they could now come and worship the Lord in the place where He manifested His presence. When the kings of the stars entered the New Jerusalem to bring their treasures to the Most High God, the Zovian leadership entered among them.

But that was not all that they did. The Artillect discovered that the aliens knew things about the Singularity that mankind had never discovered – and the aliens learned that there were entire branches of technology that had never even occurred to them. They invited Victor Stryker and Noel Lawson to their homeworld so they could have an exchange of technology and ideas. Both sides had

much to learn from each other. They also had a common goal: they wanted to reach the U16b anomaly.

A plan was made to join forces. They believed that if they worked together they could find a way to do what neither group was able to achieve alone. It was time to make one more effort to reach the unreachable.

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On February 18, 10,046 of the Eternal Era, Victor Stryker found himself standing on the surface of a rocky world. Beneath his feet was a tough, reddish rock that stretched to the horizon in all directions. Above him was a pale blue sky. The air was thin on this world and there was no life. Most worlds were designed to be the home of civilizations, but this one was crafted with a very specific purpose in mind. Every aspect of it, from its crust and mantle to its core, was the product of years of careful research and experimentation. Most of the technical features of this planet were below ground and out of sight, but there was one exception. In front of Victor was an enormous machine of a curious and intricate design. Around that machine was a large group of very excited people.

"It's quite a sight, isn't it?" Dr. Mazatl commented.

"That's one way to put it," Victor replied. "It sure wasn't easy to build, I'll say that! I thought that building the Artillect was the most difficult thing we'd ever done, but I have to say this tops it. Not only did it take almost 30 years to design and construct, but look at what we had to do to manufacture it! First we had to create a planet with just the right composition. Then we had to position it in exactly the right place relative to the Singularity. *Then* we had to build that crazy machine – which goes all the way through the core of the planet itself. That is a very expensive gadget."

"And in a way it is all thanks to you," the First One replied. The Zovian had overheard their conversation. "The reason this machine can operate is because of the singularity that you created fifteen thousand years ago. That was a most fortunate occurrence!"

Professor Grimes grinned. "It certainly was! Although I am sure it didn't seem that way at the time. Victor told me he felt like the unluckiest person in the universe when he crashed the *Vanguard* into that planet. But as we can see today, even that had a purpose. If it wasn't for that singularity we might never have discovered the only way to reach U16b."

"Which is a terrible name for such a fascinating anomaly," Amy Stryker commented. "Whoever named it needs to be taught a thing or two about inventing names."

Victor nodded. "Now *that* is something you can't blame on me! It *is* true that my apparent lack of piloting skills did result in the creation of that anomaly, but I can't take all of the credit here. The Stryker twins are the ones who finally tracked down the Zovians. I might have been the first one to receive their signal but I'm not the one who made first contact with them."

Amy spoke up. "Well, we never would have found them if it hadn't been for Velvet Dawn."

"I was glad to help," Velvet replied. "It was the least I could do."

"All in all it was truly an extraordinary team," Dr. Nehemiah Temilotzin remarked. "We have each played a part and contributed something. The sequence of events that led us to this point is rather remarkable. We would not be here today if Timothy Stryker had not made his two sisters administrators over his replicating probe project. Without that act of kindness the future would have been radically different."

"It goes back even further than that," Timothy Stryker commented. "The reason my parents

adopted Amy and Amanda in the first place was because their original parents abandoned them. The reason they abandoned them was because they had a rare genetic defect that gave them only a few years to live. Mom and dad had compassion on them, and that compassion changed history. I made them administrators because I thought their short lives were coming to an end, and I wanted them to be remembered.”

“Well, we *did* end up having short lives,” Amy pointed out. “Neither of us lived to be 20.”

Noel Lawson laughed. “I didn't meet you until five thousand years after you were born! You may have led a short life but it was spread over quite a few years.”

The Sentinel spoke up. “I do not think they have led short lives at all. After all, are you not still alive today? Have you not inherited a universe of endless wonder and joy? You have not met the terrible end of Carroll Lane, who will experience nothing but unending torment for the rest of time. In this universe all is well, for the dark things are passed away. You have lived quite a long time and you will continue to live on forever. That is an amazing gift.”

“And it is all thanks to our great Redeemer,” Amy said.

The Artillect spoke up. “Indeed it is. He purchased your salvation with His own blood, and gave His life for yours. Thanks to his sacrifice you will live forever. Throughout all the endless ages to come you will experience nothing but the exceeding riches of His grace.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Miles spoke up. “Is it time?” he asked.

“I certainly hope so,” Captain Max said. “I've waited a lot of years for this.”

“As have I,” Jones replied.

“I wouldn't miss it for the world,” Reverend Knight remarked.

“Very well,” the Artillect replied. “Shall I start up the reactor and open the Gate?”

“Of course!” Victor said. “What are you waiting on?”

Dr. Mazatl laughed. “I think all the Administrators are in agreement with Victor. By all means, Andy, don't keep us waiting. We're all very eager to see what's on the other side of that Gate.”

The ground rumbled beneath their feet. It was a soft, gentle rumble at first, and then it grew in intensity. The machinery that stretched out across the rocky plain began to glow, and a faint shimmering light appeared in the air. It was hard to see at first, but over time it solidified.

The group waited patiently. As the hours passed the machine continued to create a path through the barrier. The wormhole that it was attempting to create was a highly unusual one that exploited the odd nature of Victor's singularity. Building the passage and stabilizing it was a tricky task.

While the machine worked, the crowd around the gate laughed and talked with one another and reminisced about the many adventures they'd had in the past. All of them were eager to see the anomaly open but none of them were in any particular hurry. After all, they had all of eternity stretched out before them and they had inherited everlasting life. They were not in danger of running out of time and they would never again be threatened by any sort of enemy. Peace – unending peace – stretched out as far as one could see.

Monroe and Merlin were there to record the momentous events that were unfolding. They were not alone, for reporters from all over the universe had come as well. Everyone throughout the stars wanted to know what the Gate would reveal.

After two days the shimmering light solidified. The wormhole strengthened quickly after that. At first they could only see a blurry picture of what was on the other side – but on the third day the connection was finally made. Through the wormhole, which seemed to stretch for only a few feet, the group could see another world. It was a bright world, full of light, and the very air seemed to be filled

with joy.

They couldn't see very much of it from where they stood. There seemed to be some sort of living creatures moving about. The ground was moving as if it was made of liquid, but yet it had strength and solidity to it. Everything that they could see seemed to be beckoning them to step through the portal and enter a new realm.

“Remarkable!” Professor Grimes exclaimed.

“How old do you think that place is?” Monroe Araiza asked.

“Hard to say,” Richard Stryker commented. “It could be older than the universe.”

“Which would make it almost as old as us,” Laura Stryker teased.

“Well, let's get moving!” Governor Nicholas said. “After all, we're not going to find our answers by standing here and staring. Don't you think it's time we stepped through?”

“Absolutely!” Amy agreed. “I think it's high time we started on another adventure. Velvet, would you like to come with us?”

“I'm right behind you,” the wisp replied.

The group eagerly made their way through the portal. There was a whole new world to explore, with new mysteries and new opportunities. It was time to see what was on the other side. Who knew what amazing things were waiting for them?